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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses problems in California's public education. The government has responded with various top-down programs. California and other states have crafted state academic-content standard and accountability programs. California has approved core academic-content standards that are rigorous and emphasize real knowledge and skills. However, there is the problem of local districts refusing to adhere to state standards. Both California and New York use testing and performance indexes to calculate school performance levels and improvement targets for low-performing schools. In California, improvement targets are set at such low levels that the worst schools may take 20 years to reach average performance levels. Under California's program, poorly performing teachers and administrators at failing schools cannot be fired. Though progressive concepts such as constructivism and discovery learning have been shown to be comparatively ineffective in raising student achievement, progressive student-centered methods are widely popular among educators (partly because university schools of education are committed to progressive methods). Solutions to this problem include: public reporting of student test scores by classroom; aligning teacher education courses with tough state academic standards; and teacher sanctions and rewards based on test scores. (SM)

BRIEFING



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School Accountability and Teacher Training

By Lance T. Izumi

April, 2001

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School Accountability and Teacher Training*

By Lance T. Izumi,
Director, Center for School Reform,
Pacific Research Institute

It's a great pleasure and an even greater honor to have been invited by the Manhattan Institute to speak to you today. I have admired the work of the Manhattan Institute for many years, often using the excellent studies and publications it puts out. Manhattan experts, such as Kay Hymowitz, have traveled to California to speak at Pacific Research Institute events, and others, such as Sy Fliegel, have aided us in carrying out programs such as our grassroots charter school work.

As mentioned, I am the director of PRI's Center for School Reform and I was asked to talk to you today about a variety of education topics such as academic standards, school accountability, testing, and teacher training. I'll get to all of that in a minute, but Larry and others here at Manhattan have asked me to first touch on a non-education topic that has been grabbing a lot of national headlines—California's electricity crisis.

Now I know that for many of you, the mere mention of the words "electricity policy" will make your eyes glaze over. But let me say that if you cut through all the jargon, California's electricity mess is a fairly simple problem of the government interfering with the laws of supply and demand. In 1996, the state government approved a law that supposedly deregulated the electricity market. Trouble is, only the wholesale price for electricity, the price that power generators could charge California utilities, was deregulated. The retail price, what the utilities could charge consumers, continued to be regulated by government price caps. This all worked fine as long as the wholesale price was lower than the government-controlled retail price. However, in spring of last year, for a variety of reasons, the wholesale price began to increase. In order to protect themselves against this price increase trend, the utilities asked the California Public Utilities Commission to allow them to enter into long-term contracts for electricity, thereby locking in stable lower wholesale prices. The Commission effectively prevented this from happening. The wholesale prices kept going up, rising above the level of the government-controlled retail price. Because the controlled retail prices remained artificially low, consumers didn't feel the heat of the rising wholesale prices, had no incentive to conserve energy, and continued to use as much electricity as ever before. The utilities, which were obligated to provide the

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electricity to consumers, started to incur huge losses. Today they are around \$12 billion in the red and on the verge of bankruptcy.

Part of California's problem is that during the 1990s no new power plants were built. Further, even though a number of new plants have received state approval for construction, it takes four to five years for a plant to go through all the licensing and regulatory hoops before it comes on line. In states like Utah, it takes less than half that time. And even with rolling blackouts a reality, cities like San Jose in the Silicon Valley and South Gate in Los Angeles County have very recently refused to allow plants to be sited because of NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) concerns. Indeed, city officials in South Gate claimed that siting a clean-burning natural gas plant in that mostly Hispanic town was, according to them, environmental racism.

California Governor Gray Davis's response to this crisis has been appalling. For all of last year, Davis refused to meet with industry officials, who were warning of an impending disaster, and refused to confront the mounting problem. When he did address the problem this year, he called for massive government intervention into the energy market, including taking over the utilities' transmission grid and having the state government sign long-term contracts for electricity. Unfortunately, as opposed to last year when the utilities tried to lock in lower prices, the contracts signed by the state lock in today's high prices that, along with other actions by the state, may well break the state budget. Further, Davis is doing much of his wheeling and dealing in secret, which has set off a whirlwind of criticism from consumer groups and the press. He continues to blame the federal government and out-of-state power companies for California's problems, despite the fact that even liberal publications like the *San Francisco Chronicle* have published lengthy articles showing that it was his and his administration's ineptitude and negligence that greatly contributed to the crisis. No wonder then that Arnold Schwarzenegger is still talking about running against Davis. If he gets in the race, the Terminator's slogan could be: "Hasta la vista, Gray!"

I'll be happy to talk more about California's electricity problems in the question-and-answer period, but now I'd like to turn to the real reason why I'm here, and that's to discuss education. Much of government's response to the public-education crisis has been to enact an array of top-down programs. California and many other states have crafted state academic-content standards. In California, New York, and elsewhere, school accountability programs have been created. The new Bush administration has called for, and many states are or will be administering, statewide testing of students.

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Some of these programs hold promise, but others are questionable. California, for example, has approved core academic-content standards that have been praised for their rigor and no-nonsense focus on real knowledge and skills. The standards of other states, though, as the Pacific Research Institute, the Fordham Foundation, and others have found, are weak and often useless. Even in California, however, there is the problem of local districts refusing to adhere to the state standards.

To take just one example, after the state adopted its standards, the superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District said that Los Angeles would basically ignore the state standards and continue to use its less rigorous district standards. One study found that although some districts made use of the state standards, teachers in other districts reported that they had never seen the state standards and had received no information from school administrators about raising standards or changing their instructional approach. As California's statewide tests become aligned with the state standards, which should occur this year and next, there will be greater pressure on districts to adhere to the state standards. However, full district-level adherence and implementation of the state standards will likely be slow in coming.

State accountability programs have also spanned the gamut. Both California and New York, for instance, use testing and performance indexes to calculate the performance level of schools and the improvement targets for those schools deemed low performing. While such programs have given some incentive for schools to improve, serious imperfections and omissions remain. In California, the improvement targets are set at such a low level that it could take the worst schools 20 years to reach an average level of performance. Also in California, only about 15 percent of low-performing schools are chosen to participate in the accountability program's improvement grants and sanctions program. Many of the worst performing schools in the state are not included in the program. In addition, under California's program, poorly-performing teachers and administrators at failing schools cannot be fired, and can only be transferred. As background, I should point out that a study by our Institute found that during the decade of the 1990s only one teacher was fired by the mammoth Los Angeles Unified School District.

I want to say that I'm not against state efforts such as standards and accountability programs. Good standards and accountability programs can be a real plus in reforming public schools and the Pacific Research Institute has supported them. However, I am against ineffective programs, of which there are still too many. And even where there are good programs in place, top-down efforts often fail to address one of the key root problems of education, and that's the ineffective methods and practices used by teachers.

Indeed, Amity Shlaes, the brilliant columnist for the *Financial Times*, has written that the Achilles heal of American education is the education establish-

ment's love affair with the philosophy and methods of progressive education. Here in New York, that seems to be the case. Last month, *Education Week* ran an eye-opening article by Louisa Spencer, a retired attorney and volunteer elementary-school tutor in Manhattan's District 2. Although, as we all know, District 2 has improved student achievement, she notes that even at her school, which is one of the more improved schools in the city, 45 percent of students didn't meet the minimum state standard and only 10 percent exceeded it.

According to Ms. Spencer, this failure is due to the districtwide use of progressive educational policies. For example, she says that reading instruction at her school is done through the progressive method called "cooperative learning," which requires children to teach each other with only intermittent input from the teacher. As she describes, during cooperative learning, "many unsupervised children daydream or fool around." A significant part of the day is wasted in noise and disorder. She notes that: "Perhaps middle-class children can benefit from the leisurely use of time required by progressive methods. But the children I tutor cannot afford this luxury. A major cause of the notorious socioeconomic achievement gap stands revealed before our eyes."

Ms. Spencer is certainly right to focus on the negative influence of student-centered progressive teaching methodologies. Progressive concepts such as constructivism, where children are supposed to construct their own knowledge rather than having that knowledge imparted to them by teachers, and methods like discovery learning, where students are supposed to discover information for themselves while their teachers act as facilitators of the discovery process, have been shown to be comparatively ineffective in raising student achievement. After reviewing years of experimental research data, the late famed Harvard education professor Jeanne Chall concluded that traditional teacher-centered methods, where the teacher transmits knowledge and information to students, produce higher academic achievement than progressive student-centered methods. Also, validating Ms. Spencer's concerns, Chall found that "the evidence on the superiority of structured, teacher-centered methods for low-socioeconomic-status children is so consistent over the years that it would be difficult to reject."

Yet, despite this evidence, progressive student-centered methods are widely popular among educators. Why? Part of the reason is because university schools of education display an almost religious fervor in their commitment to these methods. In California, for example, the school of education at California State University Los Angeles states in one of its mission documents that its graduate education program "is based on a constructivist perspective of learning." San

"Progressive concepts such as constructivism ... and discovery learning ... have been shown to be comparatively ineffective in raising student achievement."

Francisco State University says that the underlying thrust of its teacher preparation program is to promote a progressive "learner-centered perspective."

These biases in favor of progressive methods show up in the required reading that prospective teachers are fed. I have just completed a study for the Pacific Research Institute, *Facing the Classroom Challenge*, that, among other things, analyzes required readings at California State University schools of education. Remember Ms. Spencer complaining about the noise and disruption in her progressive classroom? Well, a popular text used in schools of education in California and across the nation advocates less student "sitting, listening, receiving, and absorbing information" and more "active learning in the classroom, with all the attendant noise and movement of students doing, talking, and collaborating."

New York City has also been the site of math wars. Parents in District 2 and elsewhere throughout the city have complained that constructivist new math practices in the schools are hurting and confusing their children. Last year, the *New York Times* reported on New York's math wars and told the story of Mrs. Huang, whose son was confused by the new math's emphasis on estimation instead of getting the right answer. She bought him straightforward workbooks and he gained mastery. Yet, the schools of education continue to support these progressive practices. In California, a required text at San Francisco State says that even if students are confused by constructivist techniques, that's okay, because, "Confusion is essential to the process." This same text opposes an answer-oriented curriculum and says that "there's no place for requiring students to practice tedious calculations that are more efficiently and accurately done by using calculators." However, as researchers at Carnegie Mellon University have found, "All evidence from the laboratory and from extensive case studies of professionals indicates that real competence only comes with extensive practice." Also, math instructional texts like the one at San Francisco State contradict the actions of the California Board of Education, which recently adopted a K-12 math textbook list that conspicuously omits any progressive constructivist math textbook series.

To show you how way out some of the texts are in California, a reading instruction textbook at one state school of education says that, and I'm not making this up, phonics instruction is a conspiracy of the religious Far Right and "trains students to be passive and obedient" and "contributes to maintaining the unequal distribution of money and power among different social and ethnic groups." A multicultural text at another state school of education says that "we cannot afford to become so bogged down in grammar and spelling that we forget the whole story," which includes "racism, sexism, and greed for money and human labor that disguises itself as 'globalization.'" Another required text on classroom management states that "A critique of global capitalism and its relationship to patriarchy, homophobia, and racism is fundamental to a transformative politics of classroom democracy."

The end result of such teacher training is not surprising. For example, in one classroom in Los Angeles, a teacher who believed that students should run the classroom then lamented that when she took her class to the library the students took so long to quiet down and organize themselves that the library actually closed before they could go in. The children promised that they would do better next time, but think about the opportunity costs of such daily failures.

In Berkeley, an experiment to test the principle that darker colors absorb heat faster than lighter colors went awry, but the teacher refused to explain the experiment's contradictory results to the students. She insisted that they discover for themselves why the experiment failed. But the students were not given any background information on the principle, and ended up writing nothing on their papers or wandering around the classroom.

All of this is, of course, appalling. For my study, I interviewed Nancy Ichinaga, the principal of Bennett-Kew Elementary School in Inglewood, California. Bennett-Kew was one of the schools profiled by the Heritage Foundation in its *No Excuses* book featuring schools with high-performing low-income students. Ms. Ichinaga, who was just named to the state Board of Education and who is a vehement critic of progressive teaching methods, told me: "As long as the universities are full of these people who believe that the best way to teach is to get the kids to do things and to learn by doing, to learn by discovery and not by the teacher teaching them, you have a problem. And the thing is, with affluent people you get by, but the poor kids do not get by." And she's absolutely right.

"...one of the reasons that homeschooling has become one of the fastest growing trends in America is because parents want to escape the progressivism of the public schools."

So what are some solutions? Some of the things that can be done include:

- the public reporting of student test scores by classroom,
- teacher sanctions and rewards based on test scores,
- district implementation of rigorous curricula,
- aligning teacher education courses with tough state academic standards,
- teacher testing and holding schools of education accountable for teachers who fail the test, and
- school-choice scholarships for students to escape rigid progressive public schools.

I also think it is interesting to note that one of the reasons that homeschooling has become one of the fastest growing trends in America is because parents want to escape the progressivism of the public schools.

It is time to shine a strong light on the serious problems within teacher training and the impact they have on students' performance. For a more in-depth discussion of this issue, I encourage you to read my new PRI study *Facing the Classroom Challenge: Teacher Quality and Teacher Training in California's Schools of Education*.

About the Author

LANCE T. IZUMI is senior fellow in California Studies and director of the Center for School Reform at the Pacific Research Institute (PRI). He is the author of several major PRI studies, including *Facing the Classroom Challenge: Teacher Quality and Teacher Training in California's Schools of Education* (2001), *California Index of Leading Education Indicators* (1997 and 2000 editions), and *Developing and Implementing Academic Standards* (1999). He currently serves as a member of the California Postsec-ondary Education Commission and is a member of the Professional Development Working Group of the California Legislature's Joint Committee to Develop a Master Plan for K-12 Education. He is a former visiting fellow in education studies at the London-based Institute of Economic Affairs.

Mr. Izumi has also served as a consultant on welfare reform to the California Department of Social Services, a consultant on juvenile crime to the Governor's Office of Criminal Justice Planning, and as co-chair of the governor's competitiveness task force on juvenile justice education reform. His articles have been published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy*, *Harvard Asian American Policy Review*, *National Review*, *Wall Street Journal Europe*, *Sunday Times* (of London), *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *California Journal*, *Los Angeles Daily News*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Orange County Register*, *Sacramento Bee*, and many other publications. Mr. Izumi is a regular contributor to the "Perspectives" opinion series on KQED-FM, the National Public Radio affiliate in San Francisco.

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